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Dealing With Desire

by Trevor Hoppe

Lately, I've been thinking quite a bit about sexual desire, about what turns people on. Why is it that you prefer certain kinds of partners, and I prefer others? In conversations with gay male friends, I haven't had to dig deep to hear comments like, "Oh, I'm just not attracted to ____ men." Just fill in the blank. Feminine, Black, overweight - you name it, it's been said.

These statements aren't considered problematic because "it's just the way I am," right? Many people - straight and gay - assume these kinds of statements to be innocent because most have an understanding of desire that's inherent. Desire isn't learned, they say; it's completely natural. It's biological.

I couldn't help but wonder if this is really entirely true. Are we hardwired from birth to be attracted to certain kinds of people and not others? Darwin may be the most significant influence on this kind of thinking. His natural selection theory would say that people are attracted to other people, based upon their genetics, for the purpose of procreation. If the genes are "good," go for it. If not, bugger off.

This theory may seem to make some sense when we're talking about Tom and Jane and whether or not Jane has so-called "birthing hips" or Tom has hyper-active sperm. But it just so happens that most of these comments I hear aren't about sperm or hips, but about things much more suspicious; namely, race.

I'm dubious of any argument that implicitly allows for being biologically predisposed to be attracted to white people and not people of color. This assertion is obviously false. Race is not something that existed before people did. Sociology tells us that race is a social construction. Humans have attached meaning to certain skin color configurations and thus we created race. Therefore there can be no gene or other biological influence that tells our bodies what color skin to find sexy. Any biological explanation for racial preference, then, must be false.

If desire is not something biologically determined, then the "nurture" side of the equation must have something to do with it. Let's take exhibit A: *The Advocate* Magazine. Just open it up to any page and you're likely to see buff, beautiful, scantily-clad white men. You may be so lucky as to find one image of a black man ñ but his face is probably cut out of the picture, or he's in an ad for the latest HIV medication.

Our primary method of socialization isn't *The Advocate*, however. The more influential pathways are usually even more problematic. The media, movies, and television all contribute to our understandings of what is, and what isn't, sexy. Think about the TV shows of our time that have most impacted popular culture - "Friends," "Sex and the City," "Will and Grace." And ask yourself, "Where are the people of color?"

The fact is that we are constantly bombarded with images of what is sexy and typically the messages are pretty monotonous. The women are lithe and always in submissive positions. The men are buff and dominating. And both are almost always white and portrayed as heterosexual. Moreover, these images have changed over time. A woman considered sexy in the 1950s would be considered overweight today (e.g. Marilyn Monroe, who would be considered "plus-sized" today). Any category that changes so dramatically over time cannot be explained by biology.

So what can we do? How do we escape something so subtle as socialization? For one, it's vital to quit making categorical statements about who you are and aren't attracted to. But beyond this, we must attempt to challenge our own ideas about beauty. This is no easy task. After all, how do you unlearn something you never even knew you learned? Just keep in mind that your attraction is always impacted by the society you live in, and that we are all constantly limiting our options based on what other people have told us looks good or doesn't. It's not easy, but reconceptualizing desire will surely open up doors to a whole range of potentially amazing experiences never before allowed to be considered.

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